

## The Hierarchy of Truths

### Some Quotations

"In ecumenical dialogue, when Catholic theologians join with separated brethren in common study of the divine mysteries, they should, while standing fast by the teaching of the Church, pursue the work with love for the truth, with charity, and with humility. When comparing doctrines with one another, they should remember that in Catholic doctrine there exists an order or "hierarchy" of truths, since these vary in their relation to the foundation of the Christian faith. Thus the way will be open whereby this kind of "fraternal emulation" will incite all to a deeper awareness and a clearer realization of the unfathomable riches of Christ."

Vatican II. Decree on Ecumenism, n. 11

"In considering these questions within the context of the present situation of our two Communions, we propose particularly as matter for dialogue the following possible convergences of lines of thought: ....; secondly, between the Anglican distinction of fundamentals from nonfundamentals and the distinction implied by the Vatican Council's references to a "hierarchy of truths" (Decree on Ecumenism, 11), to the difference between "revealed truths" and "the manner in which they are formulated" (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, 62), and to diversities in theological tradition being often "complementary rather than conflicting". (Decree on Ecumenism, 17).

Malta Report, n. 6

"One might investigate the analogy that may exist between the "hierarchy" of revealed truth and the distinction, made famous by Pope John, between the deposit of faith and its formulation. Thus one can wonder if some doctrines as taught in the Church or as asserted by the magisterium (e.g. the recently defined Mariological doctrines or papal infallibility) do not belong to the formulation rather than to the deposit of the faith. That is, the purpose or essence of such a doctrine would lie not in itself but in its contribution to the defense, illustration, or enhancement of a truth which is central to the Christian mystery. Were this so (I say this hypothetically) the denial of such a doctrine would not necessarily amount to a rejection of the center of the Christian mystery, but could be no more than a rejection of the adequacy, value, or usefulness of this particular defense, illustration, or enhancement of the mystery."

G. H. Tavard, Theological Studies, June 1971, p.289.

"There can be no such thing as an inessential article of faith, meaning by that term an article of faith about inessential areas of Christian belief. All articles of faith must be about Christ, about the way He saves, the way He reveals the Father and the way He sends the Spirit to his Church. The onus is upon Roman Catholics to show how articles of faith about Mary cast light upon the essential Christian beliefs about Christ. They can be Christian dogmas only insofar as they do this. In this respect there is no hierarchy of doctrines. But where there is a hierarchy is in the immediacy of the connection of the saving work of Christ with a particular verbal formulation of doctrine. Some doctrines can be couched in such a form that they make no explicit mention of Christ at all. In this sense they could be regarded as of secondary rank; but the connection with Christ must be there, and in this all doctrines are equal."

"Many, perhaps all, doctrines have two levels, which for convenience can be called the symbolic and the theological. I am aware that I am raising difficult and important questions - questions such as that of the meaningfulness of distinguishing between an unchanging belief and its changing formulations. I do not wish to discuss whether a doctrine can be stated theologically without symbols. What I mean is that some doctrines which are formulated in historical or quasi-historical terms can have a further meaning which is expressed by these terms in a non-literal way, but could be expressed without them. The historical or quasi-historical formulation I call the symbolic meaning; the ulterior meaning the theological. The theological meaning is directly concerned with Christ and the Redemption; the symbolic meaning need not be. The criterion for distinguishing between the symbolic and the theological is not always identical; but, although the distinction is not always plain, in some cases, at least, it can be clearly drawn. Take as an obvious example the article of the Apostles' Creed: 'he descended into hell'. The symbolic content of this doctrine is its literal meaning, that Jesus spent the time between his death and resurrection with the dead in hell (or limbo). The theological meaning is that those who died before Christ were saved only through him, that they had to wait for him in the sense that they owed their salvation to him.

I wish to suggest the following four theses concerning doctrines which have these two levels of interpretation:

- (1) It sometimes happens that some Christians accept the literal truth of the symbolic form of a doctrine, while others do not, though without ceasing to affirm the doctrine.
- (2) In these cases it sometimes happens that Christians, while not agreed whether the symbolic content be accepted literally, agree about the theological meaning. This seems to be the situation with regard to such doctrines as the Virgin Birth or the Ascension.
- (3) By contrast, there can be disagreement about the theological interpretation among those who accept the traditional verbal form of a doctrine, such as the doctrine of hell.
- (4) And, most important for our present purpose if there is agreement over the theological meaning but disagreement over the interpretation or even the validity of the symbolic form in which it is expressed, there is no need for the one side to accept the symbol nor the other side to renounce it or cease to believe in its literal truth.

It is, I would suggest, this fourth type of agreement that we may hope can be reached over the doctrines of the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption. Roman Catholics may believe as of faith that Mary was preserved from original sin and assumed into heaven; other Christians may be unable to accept that these doctrines, so expressed, can be part of the Gospel. Both convictions could co-exist in a fully united Church, provided there was agreement about the theological level of the doctrines, which seems to me to be this: that it is of faith that God's grace requires human co-operation, provides the conditions which make the human response possible and fruitful, and results in sanctification, so that the holiness of the Church will be verifiable in the lives of its members, and will overflow from member to member; and finally that all that is truly of value in human existence continues after death, when it is transformed in heaven.